

# Expectations, introspection, and suicide in Ibsen and Shakespeare



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Both William Shakespeare, likely the greatest English playwright of all time, and Henrik Ibsen, arguably one of the most brilliant and influential modern dramatists, are known not only for the power of their tragedies but also for their memorable female characters. Among the most famous of these is Shakespeare's Ophelia, Hamlet's doomed lover, and Hedda Gabler, Ibsen's most enduring female villain. At first glance, these two women do not have many similarities: dutifully obedient Ophelia suffers passively between her father's demands and Hamlet's mockery, while Hedda is scornful and manipulative to all those around her. However, upon more careful inspection, it becomes clear that the two characters have much more in common than simply being tragic female figures. In fact, it is their common gender that makes them remarkably similar. Hedda and Ophelia " though created hundreds of years apart " are both helplessly (although sometimes subconsciously) influenced by the expectations of the men that surround them. Furthermore, thus indoctrinated in masculine hierarchies, both women are trapped in the social structures that these hierarchies propagate, rendered incapable of introspection or amending their positions. Finally, at the end of their respective plays, these very power structures that restrict the two women are the ones that ultimately leave them no choice but to break them: Ophelia descends into madness, and she and Hedda are forced to take their own lives. Though Hedda and Ophelia are players who are engaged through radically different worlds and social settings, the link of gender difference between the two is undeniable. Indeed, as John Russell Brown argues in his "Representing Sexuality in Shakespeare's Plays," nearly all modern dramatists cannot deny the influence of Shakespeare, especially <https://assignbuster.com/expectations-introspection-and-suicide-in-ibsen-and-shakespeare/>

when interrogating traditional gender hierarchies: "So many plays deal outright with...gender difference that anyone wishing to study or stage them needs to only to ask how Shakespeare dealt with these subjects" (169). This is especially the case in *Hamlet*, in which gender difference is not central to the play, but also in which it is glaringly apparent that the female characters are influenced by the expectations of the men surrounding them. The most obvious example of this working of masculine influence can be found in the beginning of the play, when the audience is first introduced to the character of Ophelia. The third scene of the opening act begins with Laertes instructing his sister to be wary of Hamlet's affections: "The charest maid is prodigal enough / If she unmask her beauty to the moon...best safety lies in fear" (1. 3. 36-7, 43). Though Ophelia seems to take his message to heart, she cannot help but comment on her brother's own hypocrisy: "Do not... / Show me the steep and thorny way to heaven" while he, on his ventures into Paris, "himself the primrose path of dalliance treads" (1. 3. 48, 50). Notably, Laertes impatiently brushes aside his sister's comment ("I stay too long" (1. 3. 53)), and, on cue, Polonius enters to confirm the double standard that his son has set forth. Polonius dispatches his son to Paris to "sow his wild oats, to learn that to thine own self [one must be] true" (1. 3. 78). However, as Juliet Dusinberre remarks in her discourse on women and authority in Shakespeare, "[Polonius] daughter must not rely on her own judgment" (94). Even her conviction of Hamlet's sincerity arouses her father's contempt: "You speak like a green girl / ...think yourself a baby / That you have taken these tenders for true pay / Which are not sterling" (1. 3. 101, 105-107).

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Just as Laertes expects Ophelia to regard his advice as valuable even in its hypocrisy, so Polonius makes sure that her whole education is geared to relying on other people's judgments? (Dusinberre 94). This education is complete and in full force when Ophelia is sent to spy on the supposedly insane Hamlet. When Polonius comments "I'll loose my daughter to him" (2. 2. 162) it is apparent that not only Ophelia's sexuality, but her judgment and her conscience, are the property of her father. By allowing herself to acquiesce to the deception of Hamlet, and thus to the overwhelming influence of the men around her, she is not only being false to her lover, but inevitably false to herself? (Dusinberre 94). The case that dutiful and deferential Ophelia is unquestionably influenced by the men around her is easy to make. But what about the willful Hedda, who seems not only to scorn but also to control the emotions of the men around her? Tesman, her husband, would presumably be the largest influence on Hedda. Yet, next to his wife, the mediocre scholar seems almost effeminate, having only Aunt Julie as both father and mother to [him]? (Ibsen 216). Indeed, just as Hamlet might rebuke himself for his own inaction, Hedda seems to do the same to Tesman, whose effeminate ineptitude dictates that he "Must like a whore unpack [his] heart with words" (Shakespeare 2. 2. 589), never truly becoming what Hedda wants him to be. What Hedda longs for is not "a contemptible onlooker on the world" (Dusinberre 278) but "Finally" an action? (Ibsen 280). She never finds the latter in Tesman. Nonetheless, delving deeper into Ibsen's drama, one can easily see that Hedda has been indoctrinated just as much, but not as explicitly, as her Shakespearean predecessor. Very early in the play, even

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before Hedda enters, it is apparent that she has inherited some kind of lifestyle expectations from her father: Aunt Julie, while listening to Berta's fears about Hedda, remarks "General Gabler's daughter – the way she lived in the General's day!?" (214). Significantly, we are introduced to Hedda not by her own name, but by immediate association with her father. Later, when Aunt Julie meets Hedda in person, it becomes even clearer that Hedda has some great stake in the social expectations impressed upon her: after mistaking Aunt Julie's hat for the maid's, then seeing her out with Tesman, Hedda exasperatedly remarks, "But where did she get her manners, flinging her hat around... People don't act that way?" (222). This obsession with the proper way to act, especially for fear of a scandal, takes on a particularly masculine tint when Hedda learns that her old schoolmate, Mrs. Elvsted, has come to town without permission. As Mrs. Elvsted asserts that "My husband doesn't know that I'm gone?" (229) Hedda immediately replies in surprise, "What, your husband doesn't know?" (229). Furthermore, she implicitly assumes that Mrs. Elvsted will be returning to him shortly: "What do you think your husband will say when you go home again?" (229). Despite her contempt for her own husband, Hedda would never leave him "she has been too much indoctrinated in a masculine social hierarchy. She naturally assumes that Mrs. Elvsted has not left her husband for good: when Hedda's schoolmate replies to her question of returning home, "Up there, to him?" (Ibsen 230), Hedda answers, "Of course, of course?" (230). To Hedda, a woman can never leave a spouse, who, no matter how effeminate, is male and therefore necessary to be attached to. One can even see scraps of the

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education that Laertes and Polonius seek to give Ophelia in their ensuing conversation. When Mrs. Elvsted describes to Hedda the work she has done with Eilert Lovborg, she adds that he has “taught me to think, to understand all sorts of things” (230). Like Hedda, the reader is “concealing an involuntary smile” (230), knowing that the only thing Lovborg probably taught Mrs. Elvsted was to “understand things” just as he does. However, this smile can also be reserved for Hedda herself, for clearly she has been taught how to think just as Mrs. Elvsted has “within a male-dominated social framework. Hedda and Ophelia are thus left to operate in a world of strictly male-influenced expectations that both women, clearly affected by the men around them, feel themselves implicitly required to uphold. The significant result of this influence is not only that both women are trapped in a masculine social structure, but also that they lack the capability for introspection” for fully comprehending the consequences of the social hierarchy and its direct effect on them. Again, in Ophelia’s case, the effect of her father and brother’s influence is obvious. Hamlet’s lover, as Dusinger suggests, is irrevocably “chained into femininity by Polonius” (306), a father to whom her chastity must be forever placed above all else. Indeed, Ophelia is inextricably implanted in a social structure that speaks of her virginity in monetary terms: Polonius warns his daughter to “Tender yourself more dearly” (1. 3. 107) in her dealings with Hamlet. Under the strict influence of her father, Ophelia becomes little more than property, but more significantly has no chance or right to develop an individual capacity for reason apart from her father. Since her entire education under Polonius “is geared to...placing the reputation for chastity above even the virtue

of truthfulness (Dusinberre 94), Ophelia effectively has no moral sense of [her] own (Dusinberre 94). The right to her own sexuality and the right to her own judgments are both inextricably linked to Polonius. Thus, Ophelia must see the world in men's terms. She simply does not have the ability to reflect on her position in the social hierarchy instilled in her by her father, nor can she ever have it: Her reason has not been educated to exercise itself without his guidance (Dusinberre 94). Indeed, this femininity is so deeply ingrained in her that to expunge it completely, she must lose her reason; instead of succumbing to her father, she must succumb to madness. For Hedda, again, the influence of the social hierarchy in which she is trapped is more subtle. Unlike Ophelia, Hedda will and does question the motivations of those around her. Ibsen's tragic female even seems to have a very villainous streak: she manipulates everyone around her, with inconsequential social incidents or larger, destructive actions. When Hedda wishes to talk with Mrs. Elvsted alone, she merely prods Tesman to write a letter. Always deferential, he complies, and to a questioning Mrs. Elvsted Hedda replies, "Didn't you see that I wanted him out of the way?" (Ibsen 227). Later, when speaking alone with Judge Brack, Hedda admits to other little games: referring to her little run-in (242) with Aunt Julie, she reveals that she had purposely meant to fluster Tesman's old aunt: "She'd put her hat down there on that chair (Looks at him smiling.) and I pretended I thought it was the maid's" (Ibsen 242). Hedda appears to be very content with the joke, until Judge Brack pauses to question her motives. A change of mood occurs: she nervously replies, "Oh, you know these things just come over me like that and I can't resist them...I can't"

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I can't explain it, even to myself" (242). Hedda knows that she isn't happy, that something is lacking in her life, yet she can't turn to herself and explain it. She is supposed to be relieved that she is married, having, as she says, "danced myself out" (239) by the age of twenty-nine. Nonetheless, she must revert to manipulative games ("What in God's name am I to do with myself?" (237)) to satisfy a need for control simply because she cannot control her own life. To Hedda, her existence is wrapped up in the social structure that she feels she needs to uphold. Essentially, as Bradbrook asserts in her discussion on Hedda as a stage character, "Hedda has neither self-awareness nor responsibility ...Although she is once or twice seen alone, there is nothing in the play that could be called a soliloquy from her" (qtd. Lyon 79). Thus, while Hamlet may soliloquize all he wants about action and in action, Hedda must conform to the dictates of her social structure. Ironically, as Bradbrook points out, Hedda is a character for whom we have no inner monologue: "she is shown entirely in action" (qtd. Lyon 79). Yet because she is so embedded in the hierarchy of which she is a part, she cannot consciously take action, and she simply attributes her need to play control games, like with Aunt Julie, to other causes: she sighs to Brack, "I often think I only have one talent...boring the life right out of me" (244). While Hedda, indoctrinated in her social beliefs, thinks that boredom is a cause, it actually is merely a symptom of the lack of control that she feels. Indeed, even the fact the Hedda must use this type of speech indicates that, as Charles Lyons argues in his socio-linguistic analysis of Ibsen's dialogue, Hedda's language "is the language of the oppressed" (21). In a world of male-dictated expectations and social structures, Hedda, like

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Ophelia, has no real control over her own life or decisions. As Hedda remarks to Tesman, however, "there is always a way out" (Ibsen 256).

Unlike the men who surround them, though, Ophelia and Hedda are trapped in a social structure that will not allow them to truly realize its full effects nor react without harsh reprimand or, what Hedda fears most, scandal. Thus, while Hedda's comment is true, both female characters are left with little choice. As Dusinger asserts, "Polonius allows Ophelia no identity independent of his rule, a condition which makes her incapable of coping with a world in which he has no part" (94). Upon her father's murder, then, Ophelia must escape into madness and her consequent suicide: Polonius has left her no other option. Polonius's warning to his daughter that Hamlet's will is not his own (1. 3. 17) rings strangely false: while Hamlet may freely ponder the existential decision of life or death, Ophelia has no such luxury. Her only way to free herself of her father's grasp, her only course for true action, is what Dusinger calls her "revolt of insanity" (261). Thus, when Claudius laments, "Poor Ophelia / Divided from herself and her fair judgment" (4. 5. 84-85), the irony lies in the fact that she was never allowed to have any judgment (Dusinger 94). A different but comparable scenario applies to Hedda. Consumed by her need for control, but for lack of any better outlet, she must constantly turn away from taking hold of her own life and instead strive to change the life of a man. In Tesman, she is hopeless "she is convinced that there is no greatness in him. Thus, by the end of the drama, her need for power over something, since it cannot be herself, has reached a fever pitch. She finds an opportunity for action that she could never find in her husband when a devastated Lovborg converses with her

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about his manuscript. Lovborg, in his despair, asserts that he only wants to “put an end to it all” (272). Hedda, snatching one of her pistols, gives it to him as a souvenir, imploring him, “Do it beautifully, Eilert Lovborg. Promise me that” (272). Even when Lovborg’s suicide is openly reported, Hedda, relieved by such an action, comments, “I’m saying that here, in this” there is beauty” (280). To Hedda, no greater relief can come from a true action; more significantly, the only true action and release that she now understands is taking one’s own life, as she asserts, “This act of Eilert Lovborg’s” there’s a sense of liberation in it” (283). Thus, when Brack threatens to implicate her in Lovborg’s death, Hedda immediately sees no other way out: “I’d rather die” (284). Like Ophelia, who is forced into madness, Hedda is effectively forced into suicide: the lack of control becomes too much, and the only true action she understands is death. Even after asserting, upon Hedda’s death, that “people don’t do such things” (286) (an oft-repeated phrase of Hedda’s, ingraining her into her social structure), there still seems to be an echo of Hedda’s only truly liberating words: “Finally” an action” (280). Though their two characters vary greatly, Shakespeare’s Ophelia and Ibsen’s Hedda Gabler are both inevitably trapped together simply by the fact that they are female. Both Ophelia and Hedda are highly influenced by the men that surround them “Ophelia directly and overtly by her brother and father, and Hedda by the overarching social figures of father and husband. Because of the expectations of these male figures, neither Ophelia nor Hedda can transcend the social structure created for them. Ophelia, with no real sense of reason or judgment, must rely completely on her father; and

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Hedda, though sensing her lack of control, can only detect the symptoms of her imposed social hierarchy, and seek to control others rather than herself. Inevitably, the power structures that restrict both these women are the ones that eventually leave them no other choice but to drastically expunge the expectations placed upon them: Ophelia casts off her father's judgment through descent into madness and suicide, while Hedda seeks true action and control in taking her own life. For Hedda and Ophelia, to be or not to be never really was the question; since both women were never truly allowed to exist independently from the beginning, their only choice in the end lay in madness and death.

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